Exploring Hawaiian Sovereignty: "Kamehameha The Great"

By Anthony Castanha

Writer's Note: This article is a continuation of our series on Hawaiian Sovereignty. With 1993 marking the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, HPP is examining and providing its readers with some background on this issue. Our first two stories concerned pieces of ancient Hawaiian history and the legacy of Captain Cook.

The shock to the outside world at the fate of Captain Cook was apparent. It would be seven years before any vessel would again touch Hawaiian shores. As briefly mentioned earlier, civil turmoil marred this period of Hawaiian history (the last quarter of the 18th century). One man would emerge as the consummate leader of the Hawaiian people - one who is still revered and respected by many people today.

Kamehameha was the first to unite the Hawaiian islands under one rule and strong enough to maintain independence at a critical time when foreign influences in the islands were beginning to steadily grow. A man gifted of extraordinary skill and intellect, it was as though Kamehameha was predestined for greatness.

Kamehameha was born in Kohala, Hawaii, on a stormy night in 1758 (probable date). It was said that he was a child without laughter and so named Kamehameha (The Lonely One). Although his family was of high rank, they were not in the line of kingly succession (Kuykendall and Day 23). The islands were at this stage divided into four kingdoms, ruled by their respected *Mo'i* (supreme chiefs), most notably Kahekili of Maui and Kalaniopuu of Hawaii, uncle of Kamehameha. The young Kamehameha grew up at the court on Hawaii where he was introduced to the complexities of the *kapu* (sacred law) system and learning the ways of war. He once saved the life of his instructor in warfare, Kekuhaupio, in a battle between Kalaniopuu and Kahekili on Maui. Kuykendall and Day also state the many hours Kamehameha had spent aboard the ships of Captain Cook in 1778, where Lieutenant King remarked that he had "the most savage face" he had ever seen (p. 23).

In November 1983 Louise E. Levathes of *National Geographic Magazine* produced a 42 page story on Kamehameha. She writes how the young warrior developed his strength and courage and recounts a well known incident where "the young *ali'i* grew so strong of limb that it was reported he overturned the huge *Maha* stone in Hilo, weighing 4,500 pounds. People shuddered at this portentous feat, for it was believed that whoever moved the great stone would one day rule the island" (p. 570). With regard to his manhood, Levathes expresses, "In the ways of being a man Kamehameha was taught by the beautiful young wife of his uncle Kalaniopuu. The experience produced his first son. Eventually, by some accounts, Kamehameha would have 21 wives and father 24 children by nine of them" (p. 570-571).

One of the only known paintings from life of Kamehameha I were made by Louis Choris on Nov. 24, 1816. Choris painted an unknown number of watercolor sketches which, differing slightly in detail, were later copied by unknown artists. Printed in *National Geographic Magazine* Nov., 1983. Honolulu Academy of Arts.

Kalaniopuu died in 1782 proclaiming his son Kiwalao successor but giving Kamehameha guardianship of the powerful war god, *Kukailimoku*. The cousins' hostilities towards each other soon led to open warfare and eventually the death of Kiwalao (Geographic, p. 571). Kamehameha now controlled the Big Island districts of Kohala, Kona and Hamakua. The next ten years to follow would match Kamehameha against Keoua, brother of Kiwalao, of Ka'u; Keawemauhili of Puna; and Kahekili, who would soon control not only Maui, but also Molokai, Oahu and Kauai (Kuykendall and Day, p. 24-25).

During this period another significant incident exemplified Kamehameha's true character. During an unprovoked raid in Puna, Kamehameha caught his foot in the crevice of a lava rock while pursuing some fishermen. One of them daringly returned and struck Kamehameha on the head with a canoe paddle which shattered into pieces. After the fishermen were caught, Kamehameha admitted his wrong in attacking the innocent and released them with fits of land. In later years he would adopt one of his most stringent laws named *Kanawai Mamalahoe*, the *Law of the Splintered Paddle*, which protects the defenseless and ensures the safe passage of women, children, the sick, and the elderly (Geographic, p. 571).

It had become apparent that as the war period progressed, the gods were said to have sided with Kamehameha. Evidence of this occured one day as Keoua, now master of half the island, was retreating home to Ka'u after being driven back by Kamehameha. As his army was passing Kilauea, "the volcano erupted and about a third of the soldiers, with their wives and children, were killed by the ashes and fumes (1790). This event was taken as proof that the fire goddess *Pele* was on the side of Kamehamaha" (Kuykendall and Day, p. 25). It also appeared to be psychologically damaging to Keoua.

In his quest to conquer all of Hawaii, Kamehameha had also sought the counsel of a renowned soothsayer. He was told that to ensure victory over the island, he must build a large *heiau* (religious temple) at Puukohola near Kawaihae, in honor of the war god (Kuykendall and Day, p. 25). When this great act was completed, Kamehameha sent two of his counselors who persuaded Keoua to come to Kawaihae to be reconciled with them. However, Keoua clearly suspected that he was about to die as he stopped to select his *moepuu*, companions in death, along the way (Geographic, p. 580). When their canoe approached the shore, Kamehameha hailed Keoua, but Keeaumoku, one of Kamehameha's loyal chiefs, instantly drew his spear and slew him (Kuykendall and Day, p. 25).

By some accounts, Kamehameha sincerely wanted peace with his cousin. As Ellis writes in *Narrative of a Tour Through Hawaii* (1828), "Kamehameha and many chiefs are reported to have regretted his death. Keeaumoku, however, justified his horrid act by saying that if Keoua had been allowed to live, they should never have been secure" (Gowen, p. 209). Nevertheless, the sacrificial offering of Keoua at Puukohola left Kamehameha by 1791 as sole ruler of the Big Island. He was now free to resume his war with Kahekili.

During these years foreign provisioning had also played a substantial role in Kamehameha's good fortune. Many historians, and many native Hawaiians today, both attribute and criticize this provisionary stage as crucial to Kamehameha's success. The *Native Hawaiian Study Commission* cites, "The ali'i, beginning with Kamehameha, were much taken with foreign implements, such as ships and guns, with which they could more effectively war against each other. A lack of military power and primitive technology thus created a form of inequality between the ali'i and the foreigners, most of whom were only too glad to oblige the desires of the chiefs. In their turn, the foreigners, Capt. George Vancouver especially, worked tirelessly to create a single kingship which, under their influence, they could then use to their own ends. Political scientist, Noel Kent, judges this alliance as crucial in Kamehameha's rise to kingship. 'Kamehameha used his contact with Westerners to secure arms and technology that gave him a decisive superiority over his opponents and eventually enabled him to unite almost all of Hawai'i under his rule.' To some of Kamehameha's prophetic, anti-foreign native enemies, he was a creature of the Europeans who as Kuykendall writes, 'had contributed most to enslave them (the Hawaiians) and to concentrate the sovereignty in the hands of a single individual'" (Trask, p. 724).

This was perhaps the case as Kamehameha, visited more frequently by foreign traders than other chiefs, had acquired an abundance of arms and men which gave him the momentum

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as the war carried on. In the winter of 1789, the first American vessels, the *Columbia*, under Captain Robert Gray, and the *Lady Washington*, commanded by John Kendrick, had also visited the islands (Kuykendall and Day, p. 25). The guns and ammunition they had sold to the chiefs surely heightened the conflict.

The fur trade was in full swing at this time and the islands were a favorite "stockyard" for many ships which had begun the custom of wintering here. The *Eleanora* and the schooner *Fair American* were two other American vessels that would play a celebrated role in the winter of 1789. While the *Eleanora*, commanded by Captain Simon Metcalfe, was anchoring off the coast of Maui, the ship was attacked, prompting Metcalfe to fire on the Hawaiians and burn their village. Tempers seemed to calm and trading continued but, "one day, when many natives had come out in canoes to barter, the vengeful Captain fired on them with guns loaded with grapeshot and nails. More than a hundred Hawaiians, it is reported, were slaughtered and many others were wounded in this *Olowalu* massacre" (Kuykendall and Day, p. 26).

Further hostilities involving the two ships would occur days later off the Big Island. As a result, the *Fair American* was captured by Hawaiians and two crewmen, Issac Davis and John Young, barely escaped to the island. Although Kamehameha didn't take part in the capture of the *Fair American*, he kept Davis and Young on shore as Metcalfe sailed away. The two men's loyalty and their advice would soon make them chiefs, invaluable to Kamehameha's effort (Kuykendall and Day, p. 26).

Kahekili died in the summer of 1794 splitting his kingdom between his brother Kaeo and his son Kalaniopuu. However, they were soon foolishly engrossed in a battle of their own (Kuykendall and Day, p. 27); Kamehameha sensed the time was ripe. In February 1795, he launched the largest army ever assembled in the islands, some 1,200 canoes and more than 10,000 men and finally captured Maui, then Molokai (Geographic, p. 582).

Kamehameha next landed his orces at Waialae Bay, Oahu, for what urned out to be his decisive contest ver. After a few days of preparation, ie began his famous march up Nuuanu Valley encountering the Oahu rmy roughly three miles from Honolulu. The forces of Oahu did initially esist bravely, but as Goweh vividly iarrates, the tide soon changed. "Then came the most awful moment of the battle. Were all the *akua* (gods) of Hawaii fighting for Kamehameha? Were the gods angry with Oahu, turning back the trade-winds so that the wet mountain mist filled the pass and hid the precipice from the eyes of the fighters? Kalanikapule and his men were being steadily driven back, then more quickly, then so quickly that the retreat became a rout, a mad, wild, pilipili rout, in which the one struggle was to escape the lightning-like spears of Kamehameha and his ali'i. Where they were they knew not, nor knew they that Konahoanui and Waiolani were towering close beside them, till with the shriek of a multitude, there was hurled a sudden avalanche of living men into the whirling caldron of mist, — a cataract of men poured bodily into the night of death a thousand feet below" (p. 248).

Kamehameha would soon be ruler of the entire Hawaiian archipelago for eventually, after several futile attempts to conquer them through battle, Kauai and Niihau were ceded to him without a fight. He would now turn his talents to establishing a new kingdom that he would oversee for years to come (Kuykendall and Day, p. 27).

"As ruthless as Kamehameha was in war, he was generous and forgiving in peace," writes Levathes (p. 588). Hawaii was in a ruined condition after the long civil war period. Thousands had been killed and famine was rampant. Through Kamehameha's leadership, the islands were soon to prosper once more. He created laws against crime and disorder, and commerce began to flourish. He urged not only the *maka'aina* (commoners), but also the ali'i to raise food and, as an example, tended the land with his own hands. The people remarked of him: "He is a farmer, a fisherman, a maker of cloth, a provider for the needy, and a father to the fatherless" (Kuykendall and Day, p. 28).

Kamehameha was once astonished when a British sailor told him that he had never seen King George III.

"But, does not George go about amongst his people to learn their wants as I do?" he asked.

"No," said the sailor, "he has men who do it for him."

Kamehameha shook his head and said, "Other people can never do it so well as I can myself" (Geographic, p. 588).

Although the breakdown of the Hawaiian religion was already eventuating, Kamehameha, painfully aware of this tragedy, maintained the ancient religious customs of the Hawaiian people until his death. He preserved the heiaus for worship and built new ones. The kapu system also continued to be observed. He would not forsake the gods who he believe had brought him to power and guarded him during his years as ruler (Kuykendall and Day, p. 29).

The infamous battle of Nuuanu Pali was the scene of Kamehamaha's final triumph in his quest to unite the islands. In 1795 he landed near Waikiki with some 1,200 canoes and over 10,000 men. Kamehameha's forces, including ali'i, in feathered apparel, drove the Oahu army to the 1,200-foot cliff, where hundreds of trapped Oahu warriors, some with their wives, met defeat. Printed in *National Geographic Magazine* Nov., 1983. Collection of Nick G. Maggos.

In 1812 Kamehameha returned to the Big Island where he settled in Kailua on the coast. He became very ill in the spring of 1819 and died on May 8, 1819, in Kailua. When it had become apparent that all the powers of the *kahunas* (priests) could not save him, a heiau was built and a human sacrifice demanded. Kamehameha, however, refused, saying, "The men are kapu for the king" - pertaining to his son Liholiho, who would succeed him (Kuykendall and Day, p. 38). A pig was cooked as a sacrifice to the gods permitting his spirit to be accepted by the *'aumakua* (family or personal god). His bones were believed to have been taken to a secret cave in northern Kona, but as the legends say, "only the stars really know where they are" (Geographic, p. 597).

It is said that probably the most important reason for the success of Kamehameha was his personality and his own ability (Commission, p. 152). At his home in 1816 Russian naval officer Otto von Kotzebue marveled at the "English" speaking king's, "'unrestrained friendly behavior,' his ability to adopt Western ways he deemed useful, and his astuteness in keeping his chiefs with him, depriving them of 'any opportunity they might otherwise have of conspiring against him'" (Geographic p. 584).

Kamehameha fulfilled his prophetic role as a great leader. It is certain that he realized at an early history the inevitable coming of the West. In all his wisdom, though, it is unlikely that he could have imagined the future impact of Westernization of the islands. He surely perceived that to have fought against the West would have been in vain. Instead, he used the West, and they used him in return.

Gowen has recorded how Kamehameha was indeed content in his luxury at home, possibly justifying what was to come, "he did not himself take the aggressive, but they (the Kona chiefs) deliberately sought him out and persuaded him to espouse their cause" (p. 128). "The Lonely One" surely would have been quite content to stay at home building his canoes, riding his surfboards, and being attended to by his wives.

Lily Toma Wins William Usdane Award

The National Industries of the Severely Handicapped (NISH) recognized Lily Toma, employee of Goodwill Industries of Honolulu Inc., with the William M. Usdane Award for her personal character and outstanding achievements.